James Tanaka

James Tanaka in a still from his *Uprooted* exhibition interview. Courtesy of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission

"The guard tower had a heavy duty machine gun. Of course no one was standing directly behind it but it looked in. As an adult I learned another reason they locked us up was for our protection. If somebody's going to hurt us, shouldn't it be pointing out?"

As a longtime docent at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, James Tanaka has garnered a wealth of knowledge. He knows government documents, dates and WWII particulars by heart, and he carries a binder full of sheet protectors filled with his family's documents and obscure paperwork from WWII that would fascinate any visitor to the museum. His family's travels from Minidoka to a farm labor camp in Twin Falls, Idaho is featured in Uprooted, a photo and oral history exhibit about the Japanese American laborers who grew a vital war staple: sugar beets.

A crop that could be turned into munitions and synthetic rubber, sugar beet production rose exponentially after war with Japan escalated in the Philippines. As the Japanese army overtook Southeast Asia, they also took 90% of the sugar supply. Quota limits in the U.S. were lifted for rubber production and suddenly, cheap Japanese American labor was desperately needed in areas where they were already being held.

James' story is from the perspective of a child, as he was only eight when his family was sent to Minidoka. But his depth of familiarity now with the larger history is driven by a mix of pure curiosity and perhaps a need to know why, and how, the United States government pulled this off. "I'm not a historian. I'm not a professional digger, I'm an amateur digger, and these government documents are there." His tenacity is proof that passion and persistence will take you far in what you want to find.

What was your childhood like before the war?

I grew up in Portland. I attended Elliot Elementary school until the third grade. We roller skated on clamp on skates. We built a club house using the wooden crates from the glass company. I went to the library and checked out books to read. We went down to the Willamette River and threw rocks into it. So most of the Japanese Americans lived on the west side of the Willamette so the neighborhood I grew up in didn't have a lot of Japanese people in it except my family and my great uncle and aunt and their three sons. They ran the small mom and pop grocery store there and they competed with the Safeway one block away and they were able to make a go of it because they did two things that Safeway did not do. They extended credit to most of their patrons which were African American because we were mixed and a lot of African Americans were living in that section of Portland. And they also prepared the food that they ate, so one of the sons would go down to the produce market in the morning and pick up fresh mustard greens, turnip greens, collard greens and they would trim it and put it all out so people could just buy it, and wash it and cook it. And eventually the main meat that went with it was salt pork. And on Sunday morning they would sell lots of chicken. So they would buy chickens by the crate and the other son would quarter the chickens and that was their fancy meal for the week.

So they really had a good business set up.

Yeah. And then after the war I ended up being there for a year while my dad came down to LA to get trained in machine work. He didn't have any real formal training with all the different machines.

How did your family end up in that area of Portland?

Because of the great uncle and aunt living in that side of the area. Their house was about two houses down from the store. All four of my grandparents died before I was born and they were in Hawaii, and so my parents left around the early '30s and went to Portland. I ended up being born there so I didn't grow up with Japanese kids, or Japanese grandparents

and I'm Sansei. There weren't a lot of us in that time frame. A lot of the Niseis were born in the '20s. And a lot of the Sanseis were born in the '40s. Culturally growing up in eastern Portland, I was an all-American kid.

Did you have any siblings?

Only after I was very old. My mom passed away in '48 and then later my dad remarried so that lady could stay in America as a Japanese national and got an annulment, so I have a half sister in the Seattle area. And later, when my son was born in the '60s, my dad remarried and so that lady could stay here in America as a Japanese national, he married her just so she could get her green card. So my half brother is as old as my eldest son.

That's an interesting family dynamic.

My grandfather left a small island that was in the Southeastern inland sea in the early 1900s and he went to Hawaii. That's because they had that two year drought in Japan so they couldn't pay their taxes or landlords. So they lost their tiny farm.

In digging I found out the average farm in Japan was 2.1 acres. In Hiroshima prefecture it was 1.9 acres. I was pursuing Discover Nikkei and I found out that in Japan once you paid your rent and your taxes, any profit above that was all yours. So that's when they took marginal land around them, expanded their farms, produced more money and that was in their pocket. So when they came to the U.S. they had the opportunity to lease land, which was always the poor farm land but because they knew how to make it fertile and productive in Japan, they just transferred the techniques here, and they ended up making lots of money.

I found another article from 1917, that said the average California farm had $42 of profit per acre and so if you had 100 or 200 acres in one harvest, the Japanese controlled 90% of the asparagus and strawberries, and those crops had multiple harvests during the growing season. I remember last year I was still getting strawberries from Watsonville and Salinas in August, so the growing season is extra long. So they didn't make the same amount–and their farms were under 125 acres–they made not double, but $141 an acre.

And other farmers were envious, saying they got the best land which they did not get. And the government was concerned when the Japanese were being excluded and evacuated, they ended up saying, 'Can you take over their farm and produce the same amount of food?' And the other farmers' corporations who took them over said, "No problem." But they couldn't because they didn't have the farming technique, and the wife wasn't working in the field. [*laughs*] I read a statement once working where a farmer said, "I can't compete with the Japanese farmer! He's got his wife working in the field with him. So those women were really hard workers because they did everything in the house and worked in the field, also.

So you came from this farming family but they also owned a store.

My grandfather when he was in Japan was not only raising satsuma tangerine oranges but he also was a blacksmith so that sort of led down to the kids learning the blacksmith trade. So they learned how to work with metal. My great Uncle and Aunt and sons started their grocery store and after my dad and mom moved from Hawaii to Portland. They tried their hand in running a grocery store, but failed.

I was seven when they opened the Portland Assembly Center, which was the exposition stockyard. They opened that May 3rd, I went in May 5th until September 4th. And then took a two day train ride to South Central Idaho, Minidoka Relocation Center. But I don't remember having to pull the shades down.

You were one of the few Japanese families in your town. Was there any sense of discrimination especially when Pearl Harbor happened?

No I had friends, and I had African American friends. Going to public school, I remember the name, Elliot Elementary. I don't remember having any problems.

So people in your community were pretty sympathetic to your family when you had to leave.

That part I have no recollection. I don't even remember getting on a bus and going to the assembly center, I have little tidbits after I got there in terms of our room conditions, which was like an office type cube. The walls only provided privacy, since they did not reach the ceiling, and a cloth door. No privacy in the rest room, and the fact that there was a fence with barbed wire and a guard tower. And the guard tower had a heavy duty machine gun. It was pointing down, of course no one was standing directly behind it but it looked in. Later as an adult I learned another reason they locked us up was for our protection. If somebody's going to hurt us, shouldn't it be pointing out?

When you were at Minidoka, what do you remember about that center and your impression of it as a young kid?

It was very different than being in wet Portland, and here it was hot and sunny. And initially, when I first started volunteering at the museum I said to people that when I first got there, this man had a dried rattlesnake skin. So two of my friends and I went walking out into the desert to look for rattlesnakes, of course we never found any. But we walked out, there's no fence. Later I'm doing research and I learned that the museum had microfilms of the newspapers of the centers. And going through the October issue of the *Minidoka Irrigator*, I found that the Army required that a fence be put in. And in November, they said they were putting in fire watchtowers. Of course all the other centers had guard towers, so that was one of the euphemisms they used at our center.

I remember having to wait in line to eat the American style cooking from the large cans of food. During 1942 people cleared the sagebrush and other plants and dug a large irrigation canal to water the fields to be planted in 1943 outside the residential area. And then we ate more Japanese style cooking. In my digging I found that a tofu maker plied his trade as did a miso maker from the soybeans that were grown. A pig farm was set up to breed pigs so we would have a supply of meat. A chicken farm was also set up for the eggs. For the holiday season we got to eat the older chickens.

I spent about six to seven months outside of the center after my parents got

approved for a seasonal leave. The application was approved December 24, 1942, so we left the center in the spring of 1943 after the FBI gave us clearance; Mr. Seaver hired my parents and we lived in a slightly better barrack apartment than the center in the Twin Falls FSA Farm Labor Camp. I remember seeing other Japanese Americans from the center living next to us. There were the migratory workers from the dust bowl days and I found out the Mexican laborers were on contract with a carrot to get them to go back to Mexico after the fall harvest of potatoes, Idaho's fame, and sugar beets, which was to withhold 10% of their wages and be sent to a bank in Mexico near their home. Again in digging, I also found that Jamaicans and Bahamians were from England under the Lend Lease program with Europe. We were called "Evacuees" and the migratory workers were called transient whites. The farm labor camp was about 17 miles southwest of Minidoka.

Did you get the sense that Minidoka's security felt more relaxed than the other camps?

In my diggings I found the April 7th meeting of DeWitt, Eisenhower, and the ten Western governors in Salt Lake City. And on page four it says 'distinction between internment and evacuation.' It spelled out clearly the difference between the two. And then, poor Milton Eisenhower had a problem with sleeping because knowing American citizens were locked up behind barbed wire and armed guards, he couldn't sleep at night. So in June, he turned the duties over to Dillon Myer, that's how he got involved.

The Washingtonians were evacuated to Minidoka first. We entered the Portland assembly Center May 5th, two days after it opened. we stayed there until September 4, 1942 when we were placed on a train to go to south Central Idaho. We arrived at the train stop on the 6th, and rode the bus to the Center. We were in Block 37, Barrack 9 and apartment a which held our luggage and three folding canvas cots and three bags which we used as mattresses after filling them with poky straw. Eventually, three of us kids saw a man with a dried rattlesnake skin. We decided to go out into the sagebrush to look for a rattlesnake, but fortunately did not find one.

And I didn't get to go to it, but there was a conference here in L.A. in 2010.

And they could not agree upon whether if internees was separate from evacuees. They were discussing the terminology, and yet, if you look at the original definitions of internment and evacuees, they're two separate tracks. I found fifteen differences between the two groups. But all these authors are copying everybody else. In fact in one book I thumbed through, they used evacuee and internee in the same chapter, as being in the same group of people.

So they were interchanging the two. What would you say about the terminology, if you were to call the camps for what they were – incarceration?

Yeah. We were first excluded, and they also had restrictions and prohibited areas where any aliens could not go. And I also found another government document that said 'there are several groups we're concerned about that could be involved in spy and sabotage and could be a threat to our internal security: German aliens, Japanese aliens, Italian aliens, people who might be involved in sabotage and espionage and American-born Japanese. That's in that government document.

So they labeled us and that they didn't put American Germans or American Italians in there. And later I found two other documents that gave them special privileges, but they didn't include Japanese Americans in any of these. And one was the curfew law that Hirabayashi and Yasui tried to confront. I'm going through the brief of Hirabayashi, and it spelled out that people could get a permit to stay out beyond the curfew hours or to travel more than five miles from their home. German or Italian, no Japanese listed. And later when the exclusion order came out on the West Coast, they had an exclusion from evacuation order. If you're over seventy years of age, you were German or Italian, if you have someone in the military service or relative or someone who died in the service from December 7th on, all three of these categories had two boxes to check, 'I'm German, I'm Italian,' but no Japanese.

It just shows you how much it was only about race.

Well it was money. Also adding to that fact, there's a big misnomer about, 'Oh my gosh we lost everything.' Well, in my digging, I found a government document that said 'We're not liable but we're providing you with free warehouse space.' And on the flip side of the sheet it has by room all the different furniture you'd have. And then, I found another document that said with some humility tied into it, 'If we're going to remove these people from their homes, it's only humane to provide storage space for them.' And the government did provide storage space. My parents left their belongings with the great uncle and aunt's house and they had a caretaker take care of it. But one of the staff members that used to be at the museum, he got his family records and it had ten crates that were stored in a paid for warehouse. And then after the war, apparently they were living in Northern California and they wanted to get their crates shipped to Hawaii where they were moving. 'Course the government didn't pay for that but it said the crates and weights of them. So people did store things.

How was the decision made for your parents to become sugar beet farmers?

On that April 7th meeting, the WRA–Eisenhower and DeWitt–were trying to feel out the state's governors in how accepting would they be to put us in their states. And naturally they all said no. Carr of Colorado was the only one who said 'Maybe.' But by the end of the month and early May all this pressure came onto the governors from sugar beet farmers and sugar beet companies. Because the government '41 had a quota, Idaho had 48,000 acres of sugar beets that they would plant. The government lifted the quota, and I came across a flyer that said, 'Plant more acres of sugar beets.' So Idaho had to plan 100,000 acres instead of 48, but because of the question of labor, they

ended up planting only 85,000 acres. And right away they were recruiting city people, women and high students, and they talked to the chambers of commerce and got the stores to close down for half or all day while their employees went out to block and thin the beets. The sugar beet seeds were all stuck together and at that time they didn't have a way to separate them. So they'd just planted a whole row of sugar beet seeds and they would all be too close together. So you'd take a short-handled hoe, whack out a section, that left a small group plus some weeds, then you go and hand-pick and leave the strongest one. So now they had space to get water and nutrients and had space to grow. When they're harvesting them, they're usually running about four to five pounds. These are not like the red beets you eat. These are large and more cone shaped.

Do you remember what that decision was like for your parents to sign up for farming?

In my digging, I found that the government decided to pay the center workers a wage less than a private, who earned about $21 a month plus room and board. So professionals earned $19 a month, skilled workers got $16 a month, while unskilled got $12 a month and all got a small clothing allowance.

I found the application form for seasonal leave, and then there were two other follow up letters from the government saying 'We're changing the date you can leave and changing the date you have to come back.' Because these were seasonal. And Idaho had the sugar beets and potatoes. I remember helping in the potato harvest. Today it's done by automation, you don't have to have all the handpicking. We had two ways to pick the potatoes. One, my mom made kneepads so we could go around on our knees and fill up two bushel baskets into a gunny sack and you set it aside, and you got paid ten cents. Of course cost of living in those days was very low. And the "okies" and "arkies," which are improper terms to use today [*laughs*], but they were out there, and the migratory workers were working in the fields with us. And they would take a wooden frame tied to their back and they'd hook on the gunny sack, then drag it between their legs and pick

up the potatoes until they have a full sack.

How much per month were your parents paid?

It was hourly wage and piece work. You might get paid by the hour or so many dollars an acre. And then when we harvested potatoes that was piece work, ten cents a bag. And when you did the sugar beets, it was so much per ton of harvest.

You were young, but do you remember what you felt at the time after being uprooted?

I didn't make any real conclusions and or anything that really impressed me. Other than I'm living here and suddenly I'm living somewhere else with a lot of Japanese people.

Oh, that's right. How was that change for you where now you were with all Japanese?

Most of my recollections as a child are about life outside the center. My fourth third grade class was at the farm labor camp with the migratory workers seated on the third bench, third grade, all of the classes were in one room were taught by one teacher. I remember playing with different cultural groups in the farm labor camp, beside some of the farm kids around the labor camp. I don't remember playing with any of the center children. I remember my first teacher in Twin Falls Bickel elementary school, Dryden. I enjoyed her class, the art work of paint on water and dipping the paper in the water, picking up the paint and giving it a mixed pattern. I was also in the winter assembly, which I believe was the story of baby Jesus, I played one of the announcers. My city friends were all of European ancestry. I got to know several of them, Kenneth Boyd, Robert Inama, Clarence Sweet whom I sat behind. My few Japanese American friends lived in the labor camp as there were not many Nisei my age and most Sansei were younger. Howard Takahashi, later known as the well known Asian artist Munio Makauchi, and I sort of got along. Tommy Enoki got to help in my dad sharecropping bulb onion field one year. The Higashi family which got an opportunity to visit in Oakland after the war years.

At the farm labor camp we played many types of children's games. And my classmates all treated me like another American! Except one little older girl, for some reason I was in the hallway during class time and this girl passed me by, and I didn't know girls knew that many swear words. [*laughs*] Reflecting back upon it, I was thinking, 'Okay she might have somebody who got killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor or captured in the Philippines, where she might have some anger. That was the only time in my life, that I know of, that I really experienced another case of prejudice.

And when did your family leave Idaho?

'49. My mom passed in '48 and so my dad stayed there a year and was working with a Mexican immigrant crew. He would go out and get the contracts for the work in the fields and then in '49 he figured he couldn't make enough of a living. Because in '48, in order to help ends meet my dad was growing green onions and we'd go out in the fields in the morning, pick them, bring them back, put them in a big galvanized tub, strip off the yellow leaves, and then put them in bundles, trim the roots and then he would take it down to Safeway store. They could put it out directly and they wouldn't have to clean them.

So you did stay in Idaho even after the war was over.

My dad was a produce buyer and truck driver and the business for James Watanabe folded when he left. So there was nothing to go back to. And then my dad one year sharecropped with this Mr. Kellerher which was within a mile where we were living. So that was my summer of weeding the field with Tommy Enoki. We were living in the barracks initially and then later in '43 my parents were granted one of the two bedroom cottages. They had those on a road outside the main barrack area. So you're in a house, self-contained. Hot water to go to the heater was heated by the water that was in the stove, so you'd have to run the stove even if you weren't cooking. I remember it got so hot sometimes that when you'd turn the faucet on for hot water steam came out. It didn't have a safety valve on it so it could've blown up. It's amazing the little tidbits I remember.

In the assembly center in Portland, two things stand out in my mind. One, when I left the building, there was barbed wire, then armed guards and a machine gun on the tower. I went to the restroom and saw five flush toilets facing away and five towards me. No partitions separating them. That was the men's restroom; I'm certain the women's was the same way. They put office type cubicle walls up and we had a cloth door for privacy and we had the folding canvas cots and straw-filled mattress to sleep on. The flooring had spaces between the boards because I remember dropping a dime and I had a hard time trying to get it out.

Very uncomfortable.

And when I went to Idaho, I remember more about living on the outside because that was about seven or eight months each year for three years instead of in the center. Because center's life i routine, same thing everyday.

I imagine it was a little more interesting with having to be out and working a little bit.

I remember being in town when the circus train came to town and seeing Mr. Truman on the back of the train in his campaign. And going to the movie theater in town and seeing a silent Japanese movie at the labor camp put on by an old Japanese man who spoke the parts. There is specific name for these people. And shooting a pellet gun. I was able to shop in town and buy and then make model planes.

When my class of 1953 at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School celebrated its 50th anniversary, it dawned on me that had I stayed in Idaho, they would be celebrating their 50th anniversary also. I was in contact through one of my classmates through email and got the address to Twin Falls Times News. I carefully figured out how many words that would fit in an ad and it got published in the paper the day after their class meeting. I thanked my classmates for treating me like a fellow American.

Wow, that's very touching. I'm sure a lot of people saw it after it was

printed.

I'm in a book called *Dadly Wisdom.* Jennifer Jordan, a Long Beach State professor interviewed fifty two fathers. So I got to put in my three pages of interview material. She also interviewed one of the 442nd vets. In mine, I got to mention my link with other people. A long time ago, I thought life was a rocky road, I had a lot of bumps in it getting locked up and everything. Life divides, the road divides.

And then later I said no, life is a ribbon. This ribbon could be rumpled, it could be rough, could be smooth, and it could also be divided and the difference is that the ribbons are on the maypole of life. So our ribbons crossed indirectly. So I figured all of that out. And my wife wanted to know what I wanted for a eulogy so I looked on sayings and I came upon Robert Frost – the road seldom travelled. That sort of describes my life, and I just added onto the end. So I don't know if she's going to read it or not, the kids can read it. I have left the forest, and I saw the maypole of life where my ribbon ended.

ORIGINALLY POSTED ON JANUARY 23, 2019